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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the efforts of the director of a composition program who is also a teacher of composition at an open admissions college to teach critical thinking by showing students how to use content rather than just acquire it. Applying Jean Piaget's learning theory to classroom teaching, the director attempts to create an active learning environment that stimulates the imagination and causes the students (many of whom are nontraditional students or first generation college students) to formulate their own questions, problems, and hypotheses instead of remaining passive receivers. Teachers in the program use collaborative activities and informal debate in first-year composition classes to help students understand issues in a particular work such as the novel "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin. Students volunteer to oppose or defend positions during a class hour and are free to use whatever logical argument or emotional appeal they choose. The effect of this debate can be electrifying for the students. During the next class period, students reflect on the issues and begin freewriting. In subsequent class sessions, students share ideas in small groups, searching for a focus and an organizing frame for their ideas. Through successive drafts, teachers answer questions and guide learners in brief conferences. These kinds of classroom activities allow students to identify and challenge their assumptions by addressing their own beliefs, values, ideas, and actions. The presence of a teacher is still very much needed but in a different way--a more supportive, coaching role. (RS)

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Creating a Collaborative Context for Critical Thinking in Composition

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Creating a Collaborative Context for Critical Thinking in Composition

I teach composition and direct a composition program in an open admissions institution. We see nontraditional students and first generation college students and others to whom the academic rituals, customs and language are foreign. In many cases they have been away from schooling for years or if recently out of high school, they were not in college preparatory courses. The vast majority of them come from small town and rural communities in Michigan or the metropolitan area of Grand Rapids with its conservative orientation. They greatly lack self-confidence and yet are willing to work hard to succeed in college in order to acquire skills to reach their ultimate career goals.

With this background, our students hunger for practical, active learning experiences. They are ripe for the educational community to teach them how to think and turn them into the educated person or what Richard Paul calls the rational person who has "a passionate drive for clarity, accuracy, and fair-mindedness, a fervor for getting to the bottom of things, to the deepest root issues, for listening sympathetically to opposite points of view" (qtd. in Marzano et al. 2). How can we best help these students, not only to acquire basic literacy skills but to be able to think critically?

Do we take them into the lecture halls and make them sit under our teaching? Do we think that if we just explain to them

our knowledge will be transmitted from us to our passive students, the passive listeners? Even though Piaget has told us that learning begins with concrete experience and then moves to abstraction, much of our instruction in college is just the opposite (Meyers 29). We often begin a new unit, a course, a book by lecturing on concepts and words and ideas. Even in our writing classes, too many times we begin a lesson by lecturing. We think if we just explain the rules, the concepts, the principles of good writing and clear thinking, the students will understand and apply this wisdom. But research is showing that this approach doesn't work. As Richard Paul tells us, we must transform this didactic mode of instruction into a critical model. We need to teach students how to enter sympathetically various points of view. We can teach critical thinking by showing students how to use content rather than simply acquire it. And we can give students opportunity to formulate and justify their ideas in writing.

In his meta-research on composition, George Hillocks found that of three types or modes of classroom instruction, in the most effective one the teacher directs activities in which students collaborate and interact with their own peers in solving problems. Hillocks calls this approach the environmental mode of instruction as opposed to the presentational mode in which the teacher dominates all activities, as is the case in seventy percent of all high school and colleges, or the natural mode which leaves the students free to express themselves with minimal guidance. In our writing classrooms, in particular, we need to

offer a context, says Lil Brannon, in which student writers engage in "intellectually provocative issues or imaginatively challenging tensions. . . so that students have an internal need to write, to seek response to ideas. . " (23). In applying Piaget's learning theory to classroom teaching, we need to create an active learning environment. This environment stimulates the imagination and causes students to formulate their own questions, problems, and hypotheses instead of remaining passive receivers. We need to deal with concrete problems where students struggle to move toward the concepts or abstractions that will be taught and are shaken from their self-centered perceptions of the world. We need to show students that being correct or incorrect is not so important as the ability to perceive a problem and wrestle with it (Meyers). We must do all of this while providing a comfortable atmosphere where students know that their opinions and ideas are appreciated, cultivated, and encouraged. They need to feel safe in expressing views. As one student recently said, "In this class we were made to feel that our ideas were important."

As Hillocks and others have shown, interaction among students is important in creating an active learning environment. I have found this to be true in the whole writing process, but especially in the prewriting phase. Students need oral critical thinking activities to help generate ideas for writing. We do a great disservice and shortcut the thinking process when we give students writing topics rather than creating conditions to develop topics. Instead we need to guide students as they solve

problems, make choices, ask questions and listen to other points of view, as well as use their own prior knowledge. We need to arrange for "supervised discourse" in our classrooms so that students can orally try on ideas, step into new roles, and gain confidence in exchanging views and experiences with those of their peers.

To give practice with critical thinking skills, teachers use collaborative activities such as group presentations, role playing, and group problem solving. I have also used an informal debate in my first-year composition class to help students understand issues in a particular work such as in the novel The Awakening by Kate Chopin. Less structured than the critical debate Stephen Brookfield talks about, or the formal debate John Chaffee uses, mine is held to trigger thinking and prepare students to write a critical analysis of a novel they find difficult to relate to at first because of its nineteenth-century style and socio-cultural setting. I ask for a group of volunteers to oppose and defend positions during a class hour. The pro side must defend and give total sympathetic support to the novel, its author, and its unconventional protagonist, Edna Pontellier. The opposing side must take an unsympathetic view of the value of the novel, its author, and the actions and choices of Edna Pontellier. With four volunteers on each side, the teams prepare by reading the same selection of contemporary reviews about the novel. Since the novel was controversial when it first appeared in 1899, the reviews are mixed. Members of each side must read through them and sort out the points that support their own side.

In the actual debate, they're free to use whatever logical argument or even emotional appeal they choose, even if outrageous. This freedom allows the students to express and answer multiple views in front of their classmates. Without lecture or my dominating presence since I sit in the audience, most of the major issues surface inductively during the debate.

In the final analysis, the contrary side inevitability expresses moralistic arguments more in keeping with nineteenth-century views against the value and purpose of fictional narrative. This side argues that the novel has little merit and serves as a negative model for young people. Invariably, the influences of books and movies on young people emerge and arguments fly. This team condemns Edna Pontellier for selfishly taking the easy way out, leaving her children and rejecting all social and marital duties. Her presumed suicide merely reflects her weakness and confusion. On the other hand, the sympathetic panel, more typical of twentieth-century views, advocates an understanding of the problems faced by the protagonist--her position as an outsider in the Creole society and expectations to conform. This side argues the realism of the novel and its artistic representation of a problem in the constraints of a particular socio-cultural setting. These students point out that divorce was not really an option for Edna Pontellier, given the legal and social realities. They will point to the double standard in the sexual conduct of males and the restrictive limits put on females. This side argues for the right of the protagonist to be herself,

courageously choosing death rather than succumbing to a repressive system.

The effect of this debate can be electrifying for the students. Suddenly the novel comes alive with relevant issues, questions and viewpoints. Soon the students are struggling to decide how they want to approach the novel in their papers. What usually follows the debate is a lively class discussion with brief summaries of a variety of critics' views so that students see various perspectives and can use solid support and informed opinions when they come to their own written critical analysis.

With the next class period comes the time to reflect and begin freewriting. The students must sit quietly in class to write whatever comes to mind. I have come to believe very strongly in freewriting or focused freewriting in the process of "growing a paper," as Peter Elbow so well describes in his Writing Without Teachers. With coaxing and encouragement, students need the time to explore their own thoughts and begin to make connections and synthesize. The following class time will be devoted to a workshop where the students in small groups present their scattered thoughts or read a draft as they search for a focus and an organizing frame for their ideas. They will offer each other critical evaluations, further ideas, feedback and support. Through each successive draft, my role will be to answer questions and guide student learners in brief desk conferences or longer, individual sessions where thinking needs to be clarified and new strategies explored.

In summary then, we have followed many of the components and qualities of critical thinking that Brookfield lays out. We have seen where critical thinking is a productive and positive activity, that it is a process, not an outcome, that it occurs in a specific context, that it is nourished by both positive and negative experiences, and that it involves emotional as well as rational processes. Through classroom activities we try to identify and challenge students' assumptions by addressing their own beliefs, values, ideas and actions. We try to take them away from their own context and enter other places and time periods to show them new perspectives. We try to create activities for imagining and exploring alternatives so that they will learn to question and look beyond the familiar and comfortable, and move beyond the concrete to understand abstractions (Brookfield, Chaffee, Jones, Meyers). How tempting it is to rush in to draw conclusions for our students, to tell them exactly what they need to know and fill them with the benefits of our education and experiences. But we need to hold back in giving them answers and instead offer them the conditions for searching and discovering knowledge for themselves. Our presence is still very much needed but in a different way--a more supportive, coaching role.

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